

A person is lying in a blue hammock on a grassy field. Their hand is resting on the edge of the hammock. In the foreground, a pair of pink sandals sits on the grass. The title 'Postpartum Euphoria' is written in a white, elegant script font across the middle of the image.

# Postpartum Euphoria

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## Postpartum Euphoria



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What drove me to climb atop my particleboard, gray-painted desk surrounded by five-foot cubicle walls? Stupidity or borderline schizophrenia, I suppose. But there I was using my chair as a stepstool and planting my bright fuchsia stilettos with deathly-pointed toes onto the center of my poor excuse for a desk. Fixing the wrinkle on my tweed flute skirt, I adjusted my badge, took a deep breath of stale re-circulated air, and belted in an authoritative tone, "I, Leslie Croft, find this place of employment a morbid hell hole. It has no personality, no class—no intelligence!"

Out of pure principle, I then turned to my left and faced those damned doors of those damned executives (God only knows, how I'd become envious of a door?) and hollered a string of obscenities sure to reach all the way to Muncie, Indiana and the monitoring ears of my mother, who, at the moment, would be sitting in her living room habitually watching *One Life to Live*.

As I shimmied my way down from the desk against a backdrop of gawking co-workers, I stabbed my heel into the cushion of my chair before finding solid ground on the austere gray carpeting and readjusting the skirt that never fit right over my post-birth hips.

The silence was suffocating. Even Marjorie, the office chatterbox in the adjoining cubicle, seemed to have finally gotten a pickle sandwich shoved down her throat. In my office, there were two kinds of people. There were those who always thought about shoving a pickle down Marjorie's throat. And there were those so engrossed in her Christian brow-beater preaching they only encouraged her banter. But that day, she was gob-smacked to the point that she could only chew her stale gum and gape at me from across the open three-foot cubicles. I took a drag of my hour-old four-dollar

espresso drink and grinned in her direction to entice a rant of exuberant spending. My attempt at provocation garnered only a wide-eyed stare.

Elated, at least for a moment, by this sudden commanding position of control, I positioned my ass on the side of the newly punctured seat cushion and whirled around in my ergonomic chair, dropping my coffee perfectly in place on the first rotation. After two more three-hundred-sixty-degree turns, I came to a stop directly in front of my computer screen. Coffee and skirt intact, I returned to the daily routine of my job.

Seven minutes passed by before security arrived at my desk. I put the final touches on an e-mail and then turned to the culprit blocking my unnatural light. Without uttering a word, the balding, stone-faced man, whose lumbering frame made for an intimidating presence, authoritatively took my elbow and ushered me to the elevators at the end of the hallway. I'd expected to be removed from the building. Instead, I was taken to an enclosed conference room on a lower floor that had fog-glass windows which gave the false illusion of privacy.

In the world of Enteract Incorporated, it was common knowledge that there were only three reasons an employee would be brought to this particular conference room with its safety-lock doors and cardboard-thin walls. You were taken there either for your quarterly performance evaluation, or to be reprimanded or fired. Since I'd just gotten my passing marks two weeks ago, that left only two possibilities. Clearly this was not going to be a job-well-done, we-appreciate-all-that-you-do kind of meeting.

The room was barren except for a large, oblong table, at the end of which sat a plump, mouse-haired woman whom I'd never seen before. I presumed she was from Human Resources and had drawn the short straw. Pinned chest level onto her puke-green K-mart suit jacket was a nametag identifying her as U. Dubrinski. Stacked neatly in front of her was a pile of papers on top of which lay a manila file and a red folder.

As I boldly entered the room in an ignorant air of supremacy, U. Dubrinski guided me with a motion of her head to a red-cloth chair that sat directly across from her. Ignoring her cue, I sat down at the head of the table, crossed my ankles, and folded my hands neatly in front of me.

Once I settled, she cleared her throat. "Hello, Ms. Croft. I don't believe we've met. My name is Ursula, and I'm with Enteract's Human Resources Department. I've been delegated to discuss a situation that occurred this morning involving you. Perhaps you'd like to explain to me what exactly did happen this morning."

I detected a hint of an Eastern European accent in her voice which I could not pinpoint. As her eyes shifted away from me and back down at the materials in front of her, I noticed that one of the papers appeared to be a Xerox copy of an e-mail.

"What do you mean?" I wasn't playing dumb, just playing the game that she'd begun.

"Today," she said, and then lifted her eyes and rephrased her opening. "A few moments ago ... What exactly happened for you to stand on your desk and scream obscenities?" It seemed the game-playing was now over.

"So it is the obscenities that caused the problem?" The words shot out of my mouth with a defiance that even caught me a bit by surprise.

"Ms. Croft," Ursula said sternly and cocked her head, "this is a serious incident – one not without some disciplinary action." Closing the manila file, she peered down at the lone sheet of paper in the red folder. "I'd like to hear your explanation before we discuss anything further."

Maintaining my cool, I met her question with a blank stare. So many things I wanted to tell her right then and there. How could I wrap them all up and still venture to make any sense? I'd been worked-to-the-bone – and for what? To satisfy a faceless corporation? To stuff some unknown CEO's pockets with more disposable income?

I studied Ursula and wondered how she'd risen to the level where she had the power to fire me. Certainly she didn't look the part. Her cheap, two-sizes-too-small pants suit certainly didn't flatter her. No, she could cast aside any dreams of winning a corporate ladder-climbing competition in that sad excuse for an outfit.

The more I sat there thinking the more difficult it became for me to answer her seemingly simple question. What happened to me at one-thirty on that day? Why did I climb atop that desk and holler my lungs out? Was it the weekly status e-mail that showed my years in the same dead-end job? Or was this my way of finally expressing my anger at business-as-usual? Maybe I just needed to unleash all that anger and frustration and tell The Man: Something is very wrong in his made-up world of managers and worker-bees. All is not hunky-dory as it's portrayed. In fact, much of this crap we do is all morally wrong and backwards.

You might wonder what kept me from advancing at Enteract Incorporated. Perhaps a better question was what kept *me* at Enteract? I wasn't a rebel-rouser. I rarely rocked the boat and played the game. I did my job and then some. I'd invested eight years of my life in this company, and what did I have to show for it? My only true break was the four months of maternity leave I spent with little Aida. But even then, it was hard for me not to think of the work that I was missing. How sick is that?

"I had a few things on my mind," I finally managed to eke out of tightly pursed lips.

As Ursula turned her tired eyes on me, I began to feel somewhat guilty for the pleasure I had experienced that day. "You thought it appropriate to stand on your desk and announce what was on your mind to everyone around you?"

"Not really," I said honestly. Truth be told, I didn't have a real reason for anything that I'd done that day.

Ursula nodded and jotted on the paper in the red folder. "May I have your badge?"

At that moment, it should have occurred to me that I was being given more than a slap on the wrist. But I either didn't see it coming or, perhaps more likely, didn't care enough to think about what the ramifications would be for what I'd done that day. In benign fashion I removed the badge from the elegantly beaded dangle my sister had hand-crafted two years earlier for an art fair on Presque Isle. A shot of boldness apparently came over as I handed over the badge and proclaimed, "Good riddance."

Looking back, there was a time, early in my career, when I was a carbon copy of Ursula. On my first day on the job, I came clad in a blue polyester-blend navy suit coat with matching tan-trimmed skirt, a buttoned-up cotton-blend blouse neatly pressed the night before, navy pumps, and sheer nylons pinching my thighs. Portfolio pad with

fresh-lined notepads and pencils sharpened at my side, tucked underneath my right arm, I was armed to conquer the corporate world. Nothing would stop me. I was prepared to do just about anything short of sleeping my way to the top.

But I found after three years that the rewards I got didn't come close to matching the energy I put into the job. All the endless hours and impossible deadlines added up to almost nothing. Meanwhile, I witnessed all of the insanity of the corporate life including repeated organizational upheaval and no less than six different bosses.

Totally unhappy with my work life, I found comfort in my clothes. If I was going to work my ass off, I figured I might as well make that ass look good.

My new turn as a shopping diva led to collecting designer clothes, gorgeous handbags and to-die-for shoes. One could say this fashion makeover paid more than good-taste dividends since three months later it resulted in my one – and only – promotion. And this was attributable not to my work ethic but to my great handbags.

As Ursula looked up briefly before returning to scribbling on paper, I observed that she was in dire need of a wardrobe consultant. Clearly she had not learned that a great handbag could do leaps and bounds for a sagging self-esteem. While I was feeling a bit sorry for her, it appeared that she was feeling the same way for me.

"Ms. Croft, we are requesting that you take a leave of absence. We know you have worked here for eight years with a close-to-perfect record, but your behavior today was unacceptable." She handed me a piece of paper with company letterhead. "However, we support you as a person and want you to have continued support while away. So, as you can see, we will give you an extended leave of absence if you can find some help for the emotional stresses you are enduring."

I didn't lunge for the paper, which apparently came as a bit of a surprise to Ursula, if her arched brows were any indication. "This form," she droned on, "states that you will be voluntarily taking time away from the office to seek counseling after next week. As a company, we know this comes unexpectedly, so we're offering you a week's salary until this time." She glanced up momentarily before returning her eyes to the comfort of the paper in front of her. "You will then be on unpaid leave for three months. After that we will have you come back in to speak with either myself or another member of the Human Resources Department to determine your capacity to return to the office full time."

Ursula caught her breath before clearing her throat, tucking her languishingly dry hair behind her ear and settling back into her chair. "Now, if you would only be so kind as to please sign this form."

"What if I choose not to?"

"To *not* sign the form?" My question caught her off guard but she quickly regained her composure. "That's your choice, Ms. Croft. But be aware, there is a possibility you could lose your job."

Career suicide, that's what she meant. As tempting as tossing it all away may have been, I caved in and took the paper.

Scanning the document, I began to realize that Enteract was basically asking me to admit to temporary insanity – and to apologize for my actions on that day.

Growing impatient, Ursula pushed a black Bic pen towards me. "You can stop back at your desk to grab a few personal belongings," she said before rising from the table and opening the conference room door to two security guards who looked like overfed grizzly bears. "However, you will have to call and make an appointment with your manager to clean out the remainder of your belongings."

"It sounds like I just lost my job," I sighed as I grasped the pen and perched it along the first yellow-highlighted area requiring my signature.

"No, Ms. Croft," she corrected. "As the form states, it is an indefinite leave of absence."

Did I really need counseling or psychiatric treatment? Or had I finally come to my senses and done the sanest thing I'd done in my eight years with Enteract Incorporated?

As if reading my mind, Ursula jumped in to explain my mandatory corporate cleansing. "We will have periodic meetings to determine when it is best for you to return. We at Enteract like to have our employees healthy and happy." She forced a grin on her pudgy face. "We want you to be emotionally healthy."

After a glance at my poised pen, Ursula motioned to the security guards. "You shall hear from me by the end of next week." With yet another forced smile, she brushed past me and made her way down the long hallway back to her Human Resources haven. As she waddled along, I couldn't help but notice her pants riding up her thighs.

"Ready Ma'am?" The tall, brawny security guard held out his arm for me.

Rolling my eyes, I signed the statement admitting to corporate lunacy. Then I slowly rose from the chair and dutifully walked with my escorts to the elevator.

When the elevator doors closed, the short guard warned me not to touch my computer. "Just pick up your personal belongings and we can escort you to your car."

The tall guard nodded approvingly and the two of them exchanged an overly familiar sideways glance.

"Sure thing, gentleman," I said breezily.

Feeling liberated, I strutted through the opened elevator doors to my desk, swinging my hips and shoulder-length brunette hair all the way down the hallway.

Back at my desk, as I collected my pictures of Aida and a few other belongings under the watchful eyes of my two security guards, I thought *what the hell?* I stepped once again onto that ergonomic chair, climbed atop my poor excuse for a desk and hand-kissed Enteract Incorporated good-bye.

My two security guard friends glared up at me disapprovingly. Then they kindly helped me down from the desk and escorted me the rest of the way out of the building.

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The first few weeks at home were more a pleasant vacation than a life sentence. Mornings were spent snuggling next to Aida, drifting in and out of sleep for an hour or more after Jon had left in the morning rush-hour frenzy. Around nine-thirty, we'd

stumble into the kitchen, with wrinkled pajamas and pink bunny slippers. Then we'd have the stay-at-home Mom version of the continental breakfast – rice cereal and breast milk for Aida; a half-pot of coffee and peanut butter toast for me.

While I may not have qualified as a domestic goddess, I managed to find an almost Zen-like appeal in the everyday routine of washing dishes, vacuuming and dusting, which I would fit in between my *me* time that included a steady diet of daytime TV.

My forced sabbatical from my job had given me a whole new outlook on being a mother, which, prior to that time, had been a fulltime job for me only during those first few weeks of maternity leave.

If you think maternity leave is an extended vacation, you're not a mother. From the moment the doctor took Aida from my loins my ears recoiled from the endless screeching. The howling continued through her first days into the four long weeks afterward. Definitely not what I expected—or what I envisioned for my new motherhood image.

In an attempt to regain my sanity – and hearing – I'd stuff my breast into Aida's mouth. My war-strewn, cracked and bleeding breasts were a small price to pay for twenty minutes of calm. If the milk bar wasn't bringing peace, I'd run to the car as my salvation. I'd drive miles around the suburbs in the off chance that Aida would get drowsy and fall into a nap. Maybe twenty percent of the time I'd hit the jackpot and that glorious nap would last longer than thirty minutes.

Now, nine months later, Aida had gained fifteen pounds and the colic had mercifully subsided. My attitude about mothering had reached a pleasant plateau. No eight-thirty staff meetings. No conference calls. It was just me and Aida – and, occasionally, Oprah or Ricki Lake.

Now that Aida wasn't screaming and grunting some baby Morse code undecipherable by the adult human ear, I'd turned a new leaf as both a mother and a wife. I was a modern-day June Cleaver, ironing my husband's shirts before he went to work and welcoming him home with hot meals straight out of Rachael Ray's *30-Minute Meals* cookbook. I'd become the stereotype of a suburban stay-at-home Mom. Martha Stewart-inspired craft projects and playground gossip consumed my afternoons. Nightly dinner table conversation centered on Aida's developmental milestones. I even managed to keep up with the seemingly endless piles of laundry.

Just when I was starting to feel content, two things occurred that shook me out of my comfort zone. First, the bimonthly direct-deposit checks from Enteract stopped coming. Then it came time for my first appointment with Dr. Brown, the company therapist.

Dr. Brown's office was just down the street from my cookie-cutter subdivision, in an unobtrusive gray block office building next to a Dominick's grocery store. I arrived ten minutes early for my 1:30 appointment, hoping to get in and out of there as quickly as possible. The waiting room walls were wallpapered in outdated watercolor landscapes that were peeling off in places. Initially, I sat myself in a hard black plastic high back chair until I noticed a clipboard sign-in form at the reception desk.

Behind a window, the receptionist smiled as I approached. I glossed a matching smile across my lips.



Bringing an attitude along with my Kate Spade purse, I sneered "Good afternoon" to the perky receptionist, who was still grinning from ear-to-ear. I signed on line number three, right below Eda Franfeltner, scooped up a malted milk ball from an overflowing dish at the counter and popped it into my mouth before turning back to my chair.

The sweetness of the malted milk ball failed to negate my distaste for the idea of therapy. Why should I be compelled to tell a complete stranger my intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when I could be using the time in more valuable ways, like wandering the handbag aisles at T.J. Maxx while sipping a Venti Skim White Mocha from the neighboring Starbucks? For too long I'd been deprived of these kinds of treats and had my eye on a Coach black tote that was sure to have moved by now to the discount stores.

When the door to Dr. Brown's office finally opened, a small, round woman came out dabbing her reddened eyes with a delicate lace handkerchief. "Thank you so much doctor," she sniffled, "This has been very helpful." She shuffled to the clear glass door, where she paused and ran her fingers over the nameplate reading Dr. Fredrick Brown. Then she pulled the handle towards her and breathed, "I'll be back next week."

"See you next week, Mrs. Franfeltner," the doctor waved modestly. "Thank you for coming." He winked in my direction and lifted from the raised counter a file, which I presumed had my name on the outside of it and the *Cliff Notes* version of my life inside of it.

Salt-and-pepper mop-like hair hung around his eyes as he returned my lingering gaze. The faded corduroy jacket with worn suede chocolate-brown elbow patches that he wore over a red flannel button-up shirt gave him a bit of country charm. When he reached for a pen out of his shirt pocket, the jacket rode up on his shoulders. Inside the file that he held I noticed that there was but a lonely sheet of paper. *Could my life story really be condensed down to one page?*

"Right this way Ms. Croft," he said, as he opened the door to his office for me.

The pine-paneled walls of his office could barely be seen through all of the framed diplomas and professional licenses and certifications that hung on them. I plopped down on one of the matching set of chocolate leather chairs that were arranged in front of a cluttered antique desk that fit snugly in the small office space. The doctor settled himself in the other armchair and again opened the manila file that eerily matched all of those piled on his desk.

"Look doctor," I said, putting my purse down by my feet, "this whole thing really is a misunderstanding." No need to waste time on customary conversational pleasantries, like formal introductions and weather analysis. "I had a bad day—well actually it was a bad week. Long, long hours, and atrocious deadlines—you know the business—and it got the best of me." Forcing a smile, I tilted my head to gain his attention.

My attempt at a preemptive strike failed to catch him off guard. His eyes rose to meet mine before his face followed with a smile that was wide, inviting and persuasive. "Let's just start with introductions." His voice was calm and quiet, but the slight smile hiding behind his lush lips suggested a bit more than amusement.

"Let's start from the beginning. I'm Dr. Fredrick Brown. But, please feel free to call me Fredrick."

I felt his gaze studying my slouched frame. Why hadn't I changed out of my spit-up-stained black dress pants? Or at least taken the time to iron the wrinkles out of my blouse?

"It's nice to finally meet you doctor." I crossed my legs and coolly ran my hands over my knee, thinking that kicking my femininity into high gear might win him over. But the only warmth I felt between us emanated from the glow of the table lamp dividing us.

Undeterred, I went to the next round in my arsenal: bluntness. "I'm afraid these therapy sessions are going to be wasting our time."

Dr. Brown still didn't crack. He simply nodded and jotted in the file before returning his eyes to mine. "How long have you worked for Enteract?" he asked.

"Eight years," I said with hushed sarcasm.

"And what did you do?"

"Training developer," I said brusquely. Surely he already knew the answers to these questions. Enteract wouldn't have just handed me over to him without giving him my rap sheet detailing all of my corporate sins.

"Now please tell me what happened that brought you here to me," he said. I detected a more clinical tone in his voice.

"It was a horrendous week full of deadlines and stress. I was miserable and tired, and I admit to being a bit grumpy. Who wouldn't be?" My cheeks flushed a bit, realizing he was chiseling away my front. "There's nothing more revealing to tell," I sighed. "I'm sorry I cannot enlighten you further."

With a raised brow and a tilt of his chair, he said, "Ms. Croft, you are legally required to see me to maintain employment at Enteract, and I would like to help you."

I nodded.

"You do understand that I cannot help you unless you are more forthcoming and willing to share your true feelings."

So I may have misjudged the doctor's strip mall office practice. He wasn't a pushover and he wasn't going to let me off easily.

"Doctor, we've just met," I said a bit teasingly. "I don't think I can just open up willy-nilly on our first meeting."

My snappy retort elicited a hearty chuckled. Emboldened, I rose from the chair and reached down to collect my purse and jacket.

Dr. Brown made no motion to stop me, but, instead, calmly asked, "Ms. Croft, after you gave birth to Aida did you have any help at home?"

"What do you mean?" He'd caught me on his hook but I wasn't done battling yet and pulled my green satin lined black dress coat over my shoulders.

"Did you hire a doula? Have a sitter or family help out? Or your husband?"

"Of course my husband helped," I said defensively. My eyes darted about and caught glimpse of my patient file which the doctor had placed back atop the stack on his desk.

"Did you feel overwhelmed?"

"When would *I* have felt overwhelmed?"

"Perhaps now – or when you had the incident at Enteract?"

I'd had just about enough. Tucking my purse under my arm, I met the doctor's gaze directly and said, "Not that I recall."

"How about overwhelmed with being a working mother?"

"Are you insinuating—"

"I'm not insinuating or implying anything," he said reassuringly as he helped me to the door. "I just want to be sure we explore all possible reasons for the irrational behavior—"

Letting down my guard just a bit, I shook my head and said, "It was a bad day. Bad week. A bad year. I had been under pressure, and finally just had enough. Isn't that enough of an explanation?"

Maybe it *was* enough of an explanation – for now. The good doctor of course knew that he had twelve more weeks with me. Casually he smiled and let me go. Our thirty-minute session cut short by twenty-five minutes. Leaving plenty of time for me to scurry to the parking lot and relieve some of the stress that had built up by driving off to T.J. Maxx for that coveted Coach handbag.

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A week turned into a month. Housework was all but ignored. Laundry piles outpaced Aida's growth. Dishes festered mold like a virus spreading during flu season. Aida's nap schedule I delicately wrapped around daytime television, except for those times when I'd join her mid-day slumber – something I found myself doing more and more.

The cookbooks went back on the bookshelf. Dinners became drive-thru fast-food pickups or dining out at Denny's.

Sensing that I was becoming bored with the daily routine of being a Mom and a housewife, Jon finally decided to tackle the issue. "Have you tried the neighborhood playgroups?"

I kicked off my three-day-old socks and retied the drawstring on my red sweatpants, stifling a moan.

"Linda has 'em once a week, right?"

"I have no idea." I shot him a dirty look and slipped out of my bra. "I haven't talked to her since we moved in."

"I think you should try to get out more. Mingle."

I planted myself onto the bed and rolled my eyes.

"It would be good for you – and for Aida."

I knew his tactic was to lure me into an argument so that I'd at least *talk* about what was bothering me, but all I really wanted to do was sleep.

"Jon, you think it is that easy?" I shot back, taking his bait with a glare. "It's all wannabe stay-at-home moms – women who *chose* to stay home with their children. Scrap-booking is more than a hobby for them; it's a competition. They attend meetings to learn how to organize a house into zones. And when they aren't attending meetings, they're scheduling them – or planning them!"

Domesticity was my worst nightmare. All I'd ever dreamed of was a successful career and a glamorous social life. Instead, what I got was closer to hell, or, at the very least, some form of ancient Chinese torture. All I found myself doing was coordinating outings to Gymboree in the midst of finding the latest must-have cleaning product, all the while being forced to talk to women whose only life's ambitions were to become mothers.

Jon sighed, pulling the brandy-colored comforter up to his chin. "I just thought it'd be good for you."

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Dr. Phil walked off the set of the television studio with his wife Robyn just as my ears caught the sound of idle chatter outside. Instinctively, I dug myself out of the sofa and rushed to the door, where I'd left Aida, saddled in an Exersaucer. No way was I going to let the neighborhood playgroup parade by and unfairly judge me an unfit or inattentive Mom just because I happen to need an occasional Mommy time-out with Dr. Phil.

Through the peephole I watched in horror as they marched on by in those ghastly neon pink-and-green hooded jackets looking like a misfit street gang.

At the end of the line was Linda, who, rumor has it, gave up her law firm partnership the day she adopted a daughter. With her elegant frame and nary a hip bone to hold her pink velour sweat suit in place, she looked the part of a Stepford wife. She could have had any man she wanted but chose instead Patty – a well-intentioned, intellectual life partner who sold organic food supplements. The partners grinned at each other and practically skipped by the window pushing a bundled daughter in a red Bugaboo stroller.

The crowd had all but passed our front porch when I brushed my matted hair from my face and placed Aida on my hip at the doorway. *Jon will pay for this*, I sighed. My hand perched to give a pageant wave. Linda spotted me at the doorway and careened the stroller back towards me as I opened the door for her.

"Wow! You're home with Aida." She beamed a wide smile I thought must hurt. "Do you guys want to come out and play?"

My stunted silence seemed to make her nervous.

"I didn't realize you were home—"

"That's okay" I said, giving my best attempt at a genuine smile of my own. "Are you headed to the playground?"

"Why, yes, we are. The one on Rosewood."

"Mind if we meet you there?"

"Oh heaven's no! We'd love to see you there. It has been a long time. I'd love to catch up. Talk. You know—" I knew all right and watched her turn the stroller around. Her daughter, clad in a purple jumpsuit and matching bonnet, appeared to be Asian and about Aida's age. "We'll see you there then?"

I nodded.

"Wonderful," she said with a flippant wave before jogging off to catch up with the rest of the group.

My schedule filled faster than I could keep up with the latest fashion trends: playgroups every Monday afternoon and Thursday mornings, ladies' nights the first Wednesday each month, and mall walks every afternoon. I really gave it the old college try, even going to Scrapbooking Mavens on Tuesdays and the Oprah Worshipers book club on the last Friday of each month.

But it didn't take long to realize that I really didn't fit in – and I began to wonder if I really *wanted* to fit in. The mindless chatter I found stultifying. All they did was incessantly gloat about their kids. They didn't really converse. They didn't talk about anything of real substance. It was just "My kid did this. My kid did that." I didn't really *know* any of them. And how could I know them? They acted as if they never existed independent of their kids.

It was during one of these Mommy gab-fests that I nearly lost it. They were all there and Luanna began telling how her daughter, Anna, had put on gloves by herself but only managed to get one finger in the right spot – the middle one.

I laughed appropriately. It was a funny story, but it created a domino-effect with one mother after another boasting about something their child had accomplished.

"Jessica almost slept through the night last night," Becky chanted.

"Brady finally did it for me," Charity followed.

As a chorus of cheers and congratulatory remarks echoed through the family room I began to feel suffocated by it all. I wanted to get on my feet and yell, "Shut up, for God's sake!" Instead, I sat in silence, choking back tears of desperation.

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"I'm generally happy," I said with a yawn.

Eric, one of the drones in Enteract's human resources department, had called at the ungodly hour of eight AM and woken me from my slumber. My last company-

mandated therapy session had been the day before, so I should have been expecting a call. But still it caught me by surprise.

"I'd like to discuss your therapy." An uncomfortable pause followed, which made me think that he wasn't used to making these kinds of calls. "Do you still feel vulnerable?"

"Vulnerable?"

"Yes, or volatile? Or unhappy?"

I contemplated poking a fork into my eye.

"Ms. Croft," he said, a hint of impatience now in his tone, "I would like to know if you feel you have recovered from your condition?"

The question nearly caused me to boil over but instead I took a deep cleansing breath and said, "Eric, let's not pussy foot around the real issue here, shall we. You want to ensure that I won't go postal at the office any more. Right?"

"Well—"

"How old are you, Eric? Never mind, don't answer. Let me guess, you're just out of college and this is your first real job. And you, being the new kid, drew the assignment to call me because, well, because no one else wanted to do it. Am I right?"

"Perhaps you might consider another three months of counseling?"

The poor kid, I'd scared him shitless. But he had to learn somehow. As I saw it, I was doing him a favor. Better to learn now, while he was still young enough to get out.

"If you think that is best," I said submissively. I wasn't ready to fight the fight, at least not at the crack of dawn. And it wasn't as if I *wanted* to go back to work at the moment anyway.

"The therapist will provide an official report once you've completed the last session."

I felt like I was standing before a judge and just been handed a life sentence. The fact was that Enteract had already written me off. I could have protested – and I'm sure that's what Eric was anticipating – but I just didn't have the energy for it. Things had changed in me since I'd last walked out of the doors of Enteract.

"Thank you for your time today Ms. Croft," Eric squeezed in. "Ms. Dubrinski will call you once your three-month term is completed."

I sensed relief in Eric's voice just before he hurriedly hung up. The funny thing was, the same feeling washed over me when I put down the phone and pulled the covers over me again.

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Almost overnight it seemed Aida became a toddler. The transition, unfortunately, wasn't a smooth one. Her mood seesawed from frantic tantrums and fits

to desperate clinginess. Once a fragile baby girl, she'd become a mobile, audible, and extremely independent monster.

If her jacket zipped, satanic screams erupted from her pudgy face until we found the jean jacket that snapped. Socks had to be adorned with pink bows or I was reduced to a magical kitty hunter crawling on all fours to find a suitable bowed pair in the imaginary jungle called the laundry basket.

Daytime routines were chaotic at best and bedtimes turned into a grueling battlefield. At the sight of her red jumper pajamas, Aida would chant, "No Mama No! No Mama No!" At times it seemed that those words had become her mantra.

"It's not that bad." Jon appeared in the bedroom doorway with Aida sniffing in his arms.

"No Mama. No crib," she mumbled in a subdued hush.

Jon hummed softly and positioned her between us on the king-size bed, and in a moment, Aida curled into the fetal position and fell back asleep.

"Looks like she knew what she wanted," Jon sighed, lifting his legs back onto the bed.

"Or you gave in."

"Oh Lord," Jon groaned, "You know she got that attitude from you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He snored in response.

"Figures," I grumbled, settling myself next to Aida, who'd somehow been transformed into a sleeping angel. Content and quiet, her rhythmic deep breaths soothed me to sleep.

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When the phone rang, I was negotiating a trade with Aida – a red Popsicle for the applesauce-smears spoon Aida had teetering above the floor from her high chair. As I rubbed my hands on a dirty dishtowel, I glanced at the caller ID. Enteract. *Three months had already passed already?*

Clearing my throat, I pulled the phone to my ear, "Hello?"

"Ms. Croft? It's Ursula Dubrinski."

She sounded different. More polished. Then again, my nine-month leave-of-absence likely had jaded my memory.

"When would you like to come into the office for a follow-up assessment?"

"I think Thursday afternoon would work."

"I'll see you at one o'clock," she said, hanging up before I could even say goodbye.

Two days later, by some miracle, I managed to get dressed, apply a basic coat of make-up and fluff my hair before the babysitter arrived. The roads were clear and I completed the twelve-mile drive in near-record time and surprised even myself by walking through Enteract's automatic revolving doors ten minutes early. Things were off to a good start.

Moments after my arrival, Ursula appeared just beyond the registration desk wearing an impeccable gray pin-striped clean-cut suit coat with matching wide-legged pants and ruby red, sheen button-up shirt. Nice, but it was the red, faux snakeskin, stiletto, pointed-toe kitten heels that made me truly envious.

I fumbled to clip the temporary badge onto my cotton-blend white button-up shirt as I stood from the cozy visitor waiting chair. Tugging at my pant leg to stop its ride up my thigh as I walked across the lobby, I held out my hand to greet Ursula. "Hi Ursula, it's nice to see you again."

Her well-glossed lips hid a smirk as she shook my hand. "Yes, it is nice to see you again."

The transformation in Ursula was impressive and went beyond her wardrobe. She looked like she'd had a complete makeover. Plucked eyebrows arched above her ice-blue eyes and golden highlighted hair framed her face so that it appeared thinner, not pudgy as it had seemed before.

If Ursula had noticed my awe-stricken once-over, she didn't show it when returning my handshake. She simply spun on a heel to hold one of the doors opening up to the hallway, newly painted in shimmering gold and navy.

Newfound confidence spewed from Ursula as she walked like a model on the runway – a stark contrast to me and my blister-induced limp, brought on by the pinching JC Penny's pump on my left foot.

"They decided to renovate soon after you left," she said as her saunter slowed to a strut. "The intention was to give new life to the old décor. Boost some energy into the place I suppose. It seems to be working, as most people are a little happier coming into work these days."

*Was that a jab at me?*

"We've also added a wellness center and daycare facilities to the south side of the building."

I nodded politely, trying to decipher her new-found business savvy. *Was all of this meant to entice me to come back? Or was she just rubbing salt into the wound?*

She led me into a conference room which had one solid back wall painted a rich, deep purple. The rest of the walls were clear glass with etched swirls bordering the bottom edges. It seemed that it wasn't just Ursula that had changed; the whole corporate environment around her had been made over.

There were four chairs in the room. Ursula motioned for me to take a seat and I chose a chair near the wall. Ursula took one next to the door, possibly as a means of easy escape.



"Ms. Croft," she said, crossing her legs, "we'd like to come to a conclusion about your employment."

She opened the familiar red folder lying in the center of the table and studied what looked to be the same single sheet from our initial encounter.

"You have been on an extended leave of absence for close to a year now. And nine months of therapy, right?"

"I'm sure Dr. Brown's report can give you the specifics," I said, pointing to the black spiral-bound report that sat at the bottom of the stack of papers.

Ursula tilted her head, studied me for more than a moment, and then filed the single sheet of paper back into the file.

"Let's cut to the chase shall we?" Seems she'd taken a no-bullshit lesson for yours truly. "As required by law, we have a position available if you would like to retain employment at Enteract. It isn't the exact position you held before your breakdown—"

"Breakdown?"

"Yes, it's here in the report. Page three—"

My hand shot up in her face. "I see. There's no need to flip through the logs of my therapy sessions. I just didn't realize that we were calling it a *condition*."

She raised a skeptical trimmed eyebrow and then said flatly, "We need to have a formal decision on your employment."

"I'm sorry?"

Ursula tapped her manicured fingertips on the table before removing two new documents from the file and sliding them my way.

"This stapled document outlines an employee agreement to continue counseling, a job description, responsibilities, pay rate, vacation policies, benefits, and various other employment details."

Next she moved the single sheet of paper before me.

"This form voluntarily terminates your employment. It also states that you will not, under any circumstances, pursue legal action or speak ill of Enteract Incorporated."

Appearing bored, Ursula placed the notorious black Bic pen alongside the paperwork and unceremoniously rose from the table. "Why don't you take a look at these two forms while I take a walk to get an afternoon coffee," she said, her smile softening ever so slightly. "Feel free to take all the time you need. I don't want to rush you." She drifted out of the room, the scent of French perfume trailing her every step.

Tim, one of my ex-cubicle neighbors, came strolling my way with a cell phone attached to his ear. Although I wouldn't call us good friends, we got along well. Tim was an office prankster and known for doing anything to get out of actually working. Reflexively, I raised my hand to wave, but he cruised by without glancing my way, seemingly absorbed in his work. *What is going on around this place?*

I looked up at the clock on the wall and thought about what I would be doing in my former life at a quarter past one on a Monday – preparing the weekly status meeting with the director, e-mailing the agenda and setting up the dial-in conference number. These things at that time in my life seemed all-important but now seemed meaningless.

It was Aida's naptime, and I suddenly ached to be near her. Rubbing noses in giggled Eskimo kisses. Snuggling shoulder-to-shoulder on the living room couch waiting for my angel to fall asleep in my arms.

I don't know what I was even doing back at Enteract. I knew where I belonged. I belonged at home, not in a cubicle. I owed my daughter happiness. And I owed myself a shot at unabridged and committed motherhood.

There was no need to wait for Ursula's return. By signing my name I was signing away my career with Enteract. But I knew I was leaving for a better job – one that I still had a lot to learn about. Sure the hours would be long and I wouldn't be paid for doing it, but I'd be my own boss and would have unlimited potential and fringe benefits. It was an opportunity I just couldn't pass up.

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*Bethany Hiitola is a working mom—technical writer by day and nighttime novelist. When not battling corporate deadlines, she writes between diaper changes, during naptimes and into the wee hours of the morning. She lives outside of Chicago with her husband and son. Visit [www.bethanyhiitola.com](http://www.bethanyhiitola.com) for more information on her latest writing projects.*